Diasporas and Political Obligation

Introduction

In an essay on the state of political theory, Isaiah Berlin (Berlin, 1969: 7) suggests that, "The most fundamental of all political questions" is, "Why should anyone obey anyone else?" Similarly, A.P. d'Entrèves (Passerin d'Entrèves, 1959: 3)(Passerin d'Entrèves, 1959: 3) claims that, "The history of political theory is to me first and foremost the history of the attempts to solve the problem of political obligation." The problem of political obligation has been called "the fundamental or central problem of political philosophy" (Dagger, 1977: 86) (Dagger, 1977: 86). John Horton (Horton, 2010: 1-2)(Horton, 2010: 1-2), in his introductory book about political obligation defines it as the relationship "between the people and their political community" and "about whether we can properly be understood to have some ethical bond with our polity, and if so how this manifests itself." Political obligation, if we accept the above statements, is one of the primary questions in political theory, and is concerned not just about why anybody would obey somebody else, but what it is about the state that makes it possible to oblige its inhabitants, or rather, its citizens. Political obligation is, in short, about the moral bonds that bind one in a special way to the state in which they are a citizen. However, what about the moral bonds that bind us to our kin abroad or to a homeland? What about the moral bonds that engender a political commitment on behalf of others who belong to the same transnational community. What about the moral bonds of a political nature that inform diaspora political practice? Whether we are concerned with remittances,[1] or with diaspora peoples "returning" to fight wars in their homeland as one author notes was an important factor in the Balkan wars of the 1990s (Hockenos, 2003)(Hockenos, 2003), or with diaspora populations coming to the aid of their kin abroad in other ways as French and British Jews did in the 1800s (Leff, 2006)(Leff, 2006) such as the Damascus Affair (Frankel, 1997)(Frankel, 1997) when in 1840 a British and French Jewish delegation went to the aid of Jews in Damascus who were being persecuted on blood libel charges, there exist a multiplicity of ways in which diaspora groups take on political actions that speak to who they are and which can be felt to be both political and obligatory.

[1] Vertovec S and Cohen R. (1999) *Migration, diasporas, and transnationalism,* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, Goldring L. (2004) Individual and Collective Remittances to Mexico: A Multi-dimensional Typology of Remittances. *Development and Change* 35: 799-840, Barham B and Boucher S. (1998) Migration, remittances, and inequality: estimating the net effects of migration on income distribution. *Journal of Development Economics* 55: 307-331, Adams Jr. RH and Page J. (2005) Do international migration and remittances reduce poverty in developing countries? *World Development* 33: 1645-1669.

In what follows I will address these questions by making three inter-related points in order to emphasise that there exists a form of political obligation that is pertinent to the political geography and experiences of diaspora peoples. First, that the way in which the state insists that its citizens are loyal to it is reflected in the disturbingly narrow way that political theory has conceptualized what counts as a political obligation. Second, that the idea of diaspora involves a political understanding about identity but which cannot be reduced to the idea of the citizen that is politically obliged. Third, that there exists a liminal political space that does not fit within the ostensibly contiguous delimited spatiality of the territorial nation-state, and that it is erroneous to assume that there is nothing in between the spaces of the territorial state and cosmopolitan geographies.

A Diasporic Sensibility for Political Theory

Although, political theory has traditionally "worked on models of 'closed societies' and exclusive loyalties of citizens toward a single state" (Bauböck, 2003: 700)(Bauböck, 2003: 700), there is a growing body of political theory literature that rejects this narrow vision.[2] Correspondingly, even though theories of political obligation are, if nothing else, highly exclusive, it does not follow that there is nothing to be gained from using the idea of obligation in thinking about the politics of diasporas. Admittedly, doing so involves a fairly radical revision of how "political obligation" is traditionally understood. Central to this tradition is A.J. Simmons's (Simmons, 1980)(Simmons, 1980) contribution of the particularity principle that limits the scope of political obligation to the relationship between citizens and the state in which they are citizens. The importance of the particularity principle is demonstrated by George Klosko, one of the foremost contemporary philosophers of political obligation. He writes, "An acceptable principle of political obligation must account for the strong connection between the individual and a specific political body, of which he is generally a citizen" (Klosko, 2005: 108)(Klosko, 2005: 108). As a political theory, political obligation is expected to reveal what it is that makes the bond so special between a citizen and their state, and which could override other obligations to peoples in different lands.[3] Nothing in the political obligation literature suggests that the idea of political obligation should have any relevance in understanding diaspora politics.

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[2] This literature is sometimes called International Political Theory. See, Beitz CR. (1979, 1999) *Political Theory and International Relations,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, Boucher D. (1998) *Political Theories of International Relations: From Thucydides to the Present,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Brown C. (2002) *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice: International Political Theory Today,* Oxford ; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Lang Jr. AF. (2015) *International Political Theory: An Introduction,* London: Palgrave.

[3] See also, Goodin RE. (1988) What Is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen? *Ethics* 98: 663-686.
Robert E. Goodin, 'What Is So Special About Our Fellow Countrymen?,' *Ethics* 98, no. 4 (1988): 682. David Miller, 'The Ethical Significance of Nationality,': 647.

Moreover, it is rare to find the literature on diasporas discussing obligation. James Clifford (Clifford, 1994: 322)(Clifford, 1994: 322) notes in an especially insightful passage, "The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there***.** But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation." Solidarity and connection are the descriptive terms of normative significance in this instance, not obligation. Indeed, although the transnational and diaspora literature presumes membership it does not address the question of obligation, even when diaspora is understood as a form of membership (Maier, 2007)(Maier, 2007). Melissa S. Williams comes close to moving in the direction of obligation in her critique of citizenship by defining citizenship not in terms of 'shared identity but in terms of "shared fate"' (Williams, 2007: 228)(Williams, 2007: 228). She notes the relevance of obligation, but only in passing and primarily about who would be considered to belong to the community and could participate in the decision-making processes of this community. The critical citizenship literature comes the closest to addressing the question of membership and obligation, precisely because at issue is a kind of shared political community and culture across state borders, and which invite specific norms of behaviour and commitment that are often geared toward sustaining the community. [4]

Why, one might ask, in the face of such theoretical obstacles and potential theoretical alternatives, would one want to think about diaspora politics using political obligation? In his book on sovereignty, the political philosopher Jonathan Havercroft (Havercroft, 2011: 5)(Havercroft, 2011: 5) suggests that as political philosophers we ought to return "to our everyday political practices." If we follow his good advice, then it follows that there might exist political obligations that are relevant to diaspora groups and which obligate them as members of a diaspora. In this sense the idea of a political obligation for diasporas has very little in common with the traditional understandings of political obligation but is rather concerned with those aspects of diaspora life that are felt, experienced or somehow understood to be both obligatory and political. Moreover, by opening up our thinking in this way, the traditional dichotomy between the state (communitarian) and a global human community (cosmopolitan) is problematized as a very obviously false dichotomy.

[4] See for example, Bader V. (1997) The Cultural Conditions of Transnational Citizenship: On the Interpretation of Political and Ethnic Cultures. *Political Theory* 25: 771-813, Balibar E. (1988) Propositions on Citizenship. *Ethics* 98: 723-730, Kymlicka W. (2003) Immigration, Citizenship, Multiculturalism: Exploring the Links. In: Spencer S (ed) *The Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change.* Oxford: Blackwell, 195-208, Thelen D. (2000) How Natural are National and Transnational Citizenship? A Historical Perspective. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 7: 549-565, Benhabib S, Shapiro I and Petranović D. (2007) Identities, Affiliations, and Allegiances. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The ethical possibility is not between a cosmopolitan or communitarian position – both of which nevertheless find as their point of reference the role of the state and our normative commitments vis-à-vis our state-based identity (Walker, 1999; Hutchings and Dannreuther, 1999)(Walker, 1999; Hutchings and Dannreuther, 1999)(Walker, 1999, Hutchings and Dannreuther, 1999)(Hutchings and Dannreuther 1999, Walker 1999)(Hutchings and Dannreuther 1999, Walker 1999). The Janus-faced character ensures as much, and as the Boyarins (Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002: 9)(Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002: 9)(Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002)(Boyarin and Boyarin 2002)(Boyarin and Boyarin 2002) write, "Diaspora is *not* equivalent to pluralism or internationalism. It is egocentric." In this way, they acknowledge that Diaspora provides an option away from the cosmopolitan/communitarian dichotomy.[5] This liminal space, of belonging to multiple geographies and communities simultaneously is not necessarily exclusive to diasporas, but it is important because of how our political geographies encourage political commitments. Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai, 1996: 19)(Appadurai, 1996: 19)(Appadurai, 1996)(Appadurai 1996)(Appadurai 1996) expresses this point when he writes that,

> Nation-states, for all their important differences (and only a fool would conflate Sri Lanka with Great Britain), make sense only as parts of a system. This system (even when seen as a system of differences) appears poorly equipped to deal with the interlinked diasporas of people and images that mark the here and now. Nation-states, units in a complex interactive system, are not very likely to be the long-term arbiters of the relationship between globality and modernity.

It is precisely this point that units the concerns found in the work of the Boyarins(Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002)(Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002), Stéfane Dufoix (Dufoix, 2003)(Dufoix, 2003), and in the ethics of de-territorialization literature (Campbell, 1994)(Campbell, 1994). In this regard, when we think of the political obligations of diaspora, much like the domestic political theory account, they are concerned with sustaining the normative basis of a political geography. This geography can be understood in a multiplicity of ways and which correspond to the different definitions of diaspora (Cohen, 2008: 4-19)(Cohen, 2008: 4-19).

Obligation

There are some prima facie reasons why it makes sense to consider the concept of obligation as having currency for our understanding of the politics of diaspora peoples. One of the most important reasons is ethical. The idea of there being political obligations that pertain to diaspora peoples is rooted in the empirical observation that diasporas can have compelling reasons to act in ways that associate their political commitments with their people. Importantly, the reason for thinking of this in terms of obligation is to avoid the reference or implicit

[5] See also, Baron IZ. (2014) Diasporic Security and Jewish Identity. *Modern Jewish Studies* 13.

assumption of loyalty. First, avoiding the concept of loyalty helps overcome the potential for falling into the trap of dual loyalty and the related presumption that minority groups pose a security threat to the state and that as members of any political community we are expected to have only a singular form of political attachment (Baron, 2009)(Baron, 2009).[6] Second, but relatedly, thinking in terms of obligation also renders it hard to conceive of diasporas as being disloyal. Since diaspora politics are, if nothing else, contingent on the normative understanding of diaspora geography and the meaning of diaspora (Gilroy, 1993; Dufoix, 2003)(Gilroy, 1993; Dufoix, 2003), to presume that diasporas can be either loyal or disloyal renders a crude dichotomy onto the multifaceted characteristics of diaspora life .[7]

For example, in his introduction to the 1986 edited volume about diasporas and international relations, Gabriel Sheffer (Sheffer, 1986: 20)(Sheffer, 1986: 20)(Sheffer, 1986)(Sheffer 1986)(Sheffer 1986) writes that, "The likelihood of contradiction arising between a state's policies and the predilections of a homeland dwelling people will obviously depend in large part on the degree to which the state apparatus identifies itself exclusively with the interests of that people." Indeed, it is precisely on this issue that he highlights the need for theoretical enquiry: "The third theoretical focus [in his book] is on the conditions in host countries conducive to the maintenance of diaspora solidarities and loyalties as well as the conditions in homelands likely to trigger or muffle their expression" (Sheffer, 1986: 12)(Sheffer, 1986: 12)(Sheffer, 1986)(Sheffer 1986)(Sheffer 1986). This approach, however, narrows the potential for our normative enquiry into the binaries of loyalty/disloyalty or solidarity/betrayal. If we think of the refusal to take on an obligation, doing so makes sense because of an overriding moral commitment. This is why political obligation and resistance are so closely connected (Walzer, 1970)(Walzer, 1970)(Walzer, 1970)(Walzer 1970)(Walzer 1970). There are cases where a political obligation, such as conscription to fight in an unjust war or obey an unjust law, can be understood to legitimately allow for resistance. The same can be said for diaspora politics, when a diaspora member or diaspora community finds themselves torn between competing normative commitments toward their homeland or kin abroad. The Jewish Diaspora provides a good example in regard to the internal tensions about what it means to support Israel or have a relationship with Israel and of how across Diaspora Jewry we can find both critique of or unwavering

[6] Admittedly, using the idea of obligation does not make it impossible to come to similar conclusions and presuming a singular form of political attachment is consistent with the political theory of political obligation. Nevertheless, thinking in terms of obligation does provide a clearer opportunity for at least considering if not accepting that with any obligation comes the accompanying corollary of legitimate resistance and thus of having multiple and competing commitments.

[7] Vertovec S and Cohen R. (1999) *Migration, diasporas, and transnationalism,* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, Clifford J. (1994) Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology* 9: 302-338. See also, Lyons T and Mandaville P. (2012) Politics From Afar: Transnational Diasporas and Networks. London: Hurst & Company.

support for Israeli government decisions being the expected obligation for Zionist Jews in the Diaspora (Baron, 2015; Kahn-Harris, 2014)(Baron, 2015; Kahn-Harris, 2014)(Baron, 2015, Kahn-Harris, 2014)(Kahn-Harris 2014, Baron 2015)(Kahn-Harris 2014, Baron 2015) .

To explore the idea of diasporas having political obligations recognizes that their choices follow from a multitude of potentially competing normative commitments and not from some overriding and singular force of sovereignty.[8] This idea of political obligation for diasporas is not about sovereignty, the law or the authority of the state, but about the phenomenology of conforming as members of a diaspora community. In hermeneutic phenomenology, this kind of conformity is an important feature of our being-in-the-world. [9] In other words, the pressures we face as members of a society are part of the phenomenological structure of the world and of our ability to function in this world.[10] Because these pressures are ontological we can understand them as being obligatory,[11] but because we always have a choice in our conforming behaviour, they are also normative.

Politics

What makes the obligation political in our concern about diaspora politics is, among other things, the way that the expectation of behavior/conduct and/or belief are tied to the very identity of the diaspora member or diaspora community. In other words, whereas political obligation hinges on how our identity as citizens incurs

[8] This is based on the traditional understanding of sovereignty. See, for example, Bodin J and Franklin JH. (1992) *On Sovereignty: Four Chapters from The Six Books of the Commonwealth,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Havercroft J. (2011) *Captives of Sovereignty,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Krasner SD. (1999) *Sovereignty : organized hypocrisy,* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, Bartelson J. (1995) *A genealogy of sovereignty,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[9] Martin Heidegger describes this feature of phenomenology according to the concept of *Das Man*. See Heidegger M. (1962 (1999)) *Being and Time,* Oxford: Blackwell.

[10] Dreyfus HL. (1991) Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

[11] This correlation follows from the argument advanced by Hans Jonas that our being-in-the-world as humans carries with political responsibilities, in other words, that there do follow normative commitments that follow from our ontological existence. See, Jonas H. (1985) *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

a special bond to our state, the identity of belonging to a diaspora incurs a special bond to one's people.[12] Theorists of political obligation, such as Margaret Gilbert,[13] seek out features of the relationship that render the political obligations legitimate. However, when we consider that for diasporas, obligations follow out of their diasporic identity (as opposed to their citizenship, for example), it becomes not the relationship between an agent and some external source that can oblige said agent that provides the normative grounds, but rather the ethical construction of diaspora identity itself. Said differently, it is by virtue of one's being-in-the-world as a diaspora that creates the potential for obligations – the pressures of identity and conformity – and what makes them political is that the obligation is directed both toward the normative future of this community (which, incidentally, corresponds to Hans Jonas' theory of political responsibility) and one's own self-understanding as a member of this community.[14]

Political obligations follow from membership in an identification with a community and there can be no theory of diaspora without acknowledging membership. Even in some of the more metaphorical usages of the term diaspora, central to the idea of diaspora is membership.[15] This community is spatially complicated. In Judith Butler's work about Jews, Israel and Zionism, she uses the de-territorialised experiences of diaspora as the spatial frame in which to argue for a political ethic of responsibility that is not rooted in the violence of sovereignty.[16] A more detailed spatial theory of this kind of can be found in the seminal text by the Boyarin brothers (Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002)(Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002)(Boyarin and Boyarin, 2002)(Boyarin and Boyarin 2002)(Boyarin and Boyarin 2002), and from the French scholar Stéphane Dufoix who points out the Janus-faced character of Diaspora in its allowing for "dispersion to be thought of either as a state of incompleteness or a state of completeness."[17] The word diaspora, Dufoix writes, "nicely fits the changes in the relationships to distance, in view of the quasi-disappearance of time in its relationship to space. The technological possibility of proximity between people who resemble each other in some way — whether

[12] On the subject of peoplehood, although more statist than is concerned here, see, Smith RM. (2003) *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[13] Gilbert M. (2006) *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society,* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[14] See, Baron IZ. (2015) *Obligation in Exile: The Jewish Diaspora and a Theory of International Political Obligation,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[15] Gilroy P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Dufoix S. (2003) *Diasporas,* Berkeley: University of California Press. Black Atlantic.

[16] Butler J. (2012) *Parting ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism,* New York: Columbia University Press. See also, Rose J. (2005) *The question of Zion,* Princeton, N.J. ; Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

[17] Dufoix S. (2003) *Diasporas,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

religious, national, ethnic, cultural, professional, or other — allows non-territorialized links (networks) to emerge."[18] This spatial account of diaspora ostensibly opens up the conditions in which a non-territorialized or de-territoralized account of ethics is possible, which is part of what the Boyarins are getting at when they write "there may be something gained in thinking about diaspora… as a positive *resource* in the necessary rethinking of models of policy in the current erosion and questioning of the modern nation-state system and ideal."[19] This is the power of Diaspora, one that enables a rethinking of the spatial grounds on which political ethics (and perhaps political responsibility) can be re-conceptualized.

The spatial and the ethical is, in their argument, linked:

> Diaspora offers an alternative 'ground' to that of the territorial state for the intricate and always contentious linkage between cultural identity and political organization. Such an alternative ground could avoid the necessarily violent ways in which states resist their own inevitable impermanence. It could also ameliorate the insistence on purity that derives from the dominant, static conception of legitimate collective identity[20]

Significantly, however,

Yet these variations do not ultimately change that the spatial framing by itself only provides an ethical argument if we assume that a particular kind of ontological structure can carry within it normative inferences. Because of the is/ought problem, however, when the literature does make this kind of connection, the normative is derived not from our Being as such, but rather from the social constructions of our identity (which can change). This formulation that links political practice to identity is addressed in the sociology of Anthony Giddens[21] and in the literature on ontological security.[22] One important book in this field, *Defacing Power*, argues that our sense of identity informs our ability to interpret security risks.[23] The general argument is that who we think we are shapes our ability to interpret the world around us in ways that matter for our political decisions. This insight

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Boyarin J and Boyarin D. (2002) *Powers of diaspora : two essays on the relevance of Jewish culture,* Minneapolis, Minn. ; London: University of Minnesota Press. Emphasis in original.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Giddens A. (1976) *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretive Sociologies,* New York: Basic Books.
[22] See especially, Steele BJ. (2008) *Ontological Security in International Relations: self-identity and the IR state,* London: Routledge.
[23] Steele BJ. (2010) *Defacing power : the aesthetics of insecurity in global politics,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

is relevant for diasporas, just like it is for anybody else. Yet, when we work out the normative challenges that face a diaspora group, there are competing identities that follow from the ontological condition of diaspora, which is rooted in multiple identities and geographies simultaneously. As a consequence, inquiring into the normative features of diaspora politics involves engaging with this multiplicity.

Conclusion

Although the above is a fairly condensed outline that borrows form a range of literatures – diaspora studies, international theory, political theory – the underlying argument is that there is a way in which we can think of diaspora politics as involving obligations that are political. They are obligatory to the extent that they emerge out of the phenomenological structure of diaspora being-in-the-world, and they are political in that they refer to normative commitments that exist according to the complex geography of diaspora identity and identification. There are, as a consequence three, aspects to any theory of diaspora political obligations.

First, diaspora political obligations follow from the ontological character of diaspora life, that the identity of diaspora incurs political commitments that may conflict and which conflict because of the multiple facets of diaspora identity and geography. Second, diaspora political obligation help reveal the political tensions within diaspora life. This revealing serves to highlight not what the areas of controversy are, but why they are controversial, and it does so by highlighting the phenomenological (ontological) dimension of diaspora life. And third, diaspora political obligation suggest that the normative commitments of diaspora follows not because of any special relationship between citizen and polity, but rather because of their identity and this means that it is not loyalty or solidarity that matters in diaspora politics because one's actions will necessarily be consistent with one's self-understanding.

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